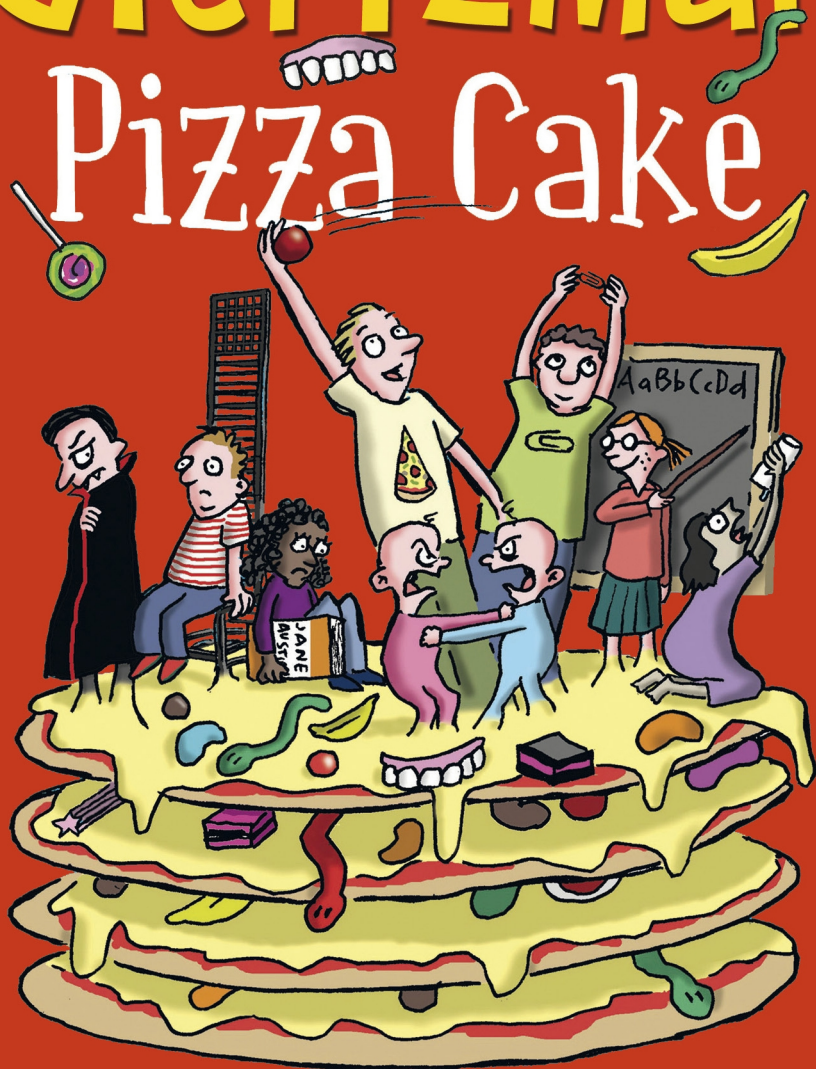




Morris Gleitzman

Pizza Cake



And Other Funny Stories

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Saving Ms Fosdyke

Dad was flabbergasted when I told him the news.

He nearly dropped the plate he was washing up. He stared at me, water dripping off his elbows.

‘Fifty million?’ he said. ‘Your school is selling Ms Fosdyke to West Chirnside Primary for fifty million pounds?’

I nodded sadly.

‘That’s crazy,’ said Dad. ‘They could get heaps more for a teacher like her. The primary school near the library just paid over seventy million for a year-four teacher with half her experience.’

Mum nodded as she took the plate from him and dried it.

‘And that was a bargain,’ she said. ‘Last week the high school paid a hundred million pounds for a maths teacher.’

‘Crazy,’ said Dad. ‘Giving away a top teacher like

Ms Fosdyke for fifty million. You don't even get a good footballer for that these days.'

I agreed. It was crazy.

And it was all my fault.

'Emmy, love, don't chew your pen,' said Mum. 'Those pens cost nearly a pound each. Have you finished your homework?'

'Almost,' I said. 'I'm doing my creative writing task. I'm making up a story about some teachers who are badly paid and overworked and don't get much respect.'

Mum frowned.

'Sounds a bit far-fetched,' she said.

'It's a fantasy story,' I said. 'Ms Fosdyke encourages us to use our imagination.'

Dad wiped his hands and picked up my exercise book and read a couple of sentences. He frowned and put the exercise book down again.

'Even fantasy stories need to be a little bit believable, Emmy,' he said. 'You can't just write totally impossible crazy stuff.'

Mum sat down next to me at the kitchen table and put her arm round me.

'You must be feeling sad,' she said. 'About Ms Fosdyke being transferred.'

I nodded.

Mum and Dad both looked sympathetic.

Suddenly I knew I had to risk it and tell them. So they'd see why it was so important that Ms Fosdyke didn't leave.

‘Ms Fosdyke thinks that one day . . .’

I hesitated for a sec. Was this going to sound dopey?

‘. . . that one day I could be a teacher.’

Mum and Dad just stared at me. They were both flabbergasted.

‘A teacher?’ said Mum.

‘Are you sure?’ said Dad.

I nodded.

‘Oh love,’ said Mum. ‘That might be pushing it a bit. Why don’t you lower your sights just a little. What about being a doctor? Or a lawyer?’

‘I want to be a teacher,’ I said quietly. ‘I want to help people’s minds blossom like Ms Fosdyke does.’

Mum sighed.

‘Emmy,’ she said. ‘Only the smartest, cleverest, most brilliant people get to be teachers. You know that. It’s good to be ambitious, but it’s not good to set yourself up for disappointment.’

‘Airline pilot,’ said Dad. ‘Why not give that a try? That’s more sensible, eh?’

I didn’t reply.

Mum and Dad meant well, but the trouble was they didn’t really believe in me. Not really. Not like Ms Fosdyke.

That’s why I had to stop her going.

The next day I asked Dad to drop me off early at school.

He said he would, but halfway there the van got

a puncture and by the time he'd fixed it he was late for his first job, which was a leaky toilet, so I had to walk the rest of the way.

When I got to school, the bell had gone. In the playground, the volunteer parents were lining everyone up in class rows.

I ducked down behind the only car in the staff carpark. Ms Fosdyke's Lamborghini. She always came in early to do her marking. That was one of the ways she was different to the other teachers. She reckoned teachers should do their own marking and not just get big law firms to do it.

I crept into school without anyone seeing me.

As I hurried down the corridor, all the staffrooms were quiet. I wasn't surprised. Most of the other teachers didn't come in till ten. Eleven if they felt like a lie-in. But I knew Ms Fosdyke would be in her staffroom.

I tapped on her door.

I could hear voices inside. The radio probably. Ms Fosdyke often listened to the radio while she did her marking so she could find out what was happening in the world and let us kids know. She also went overseas in the school holidays, but you couldn't see everything in only four trips a year, not even when you had your own plane.

The door opened.

'Hello, Emmy,' said Ms Fosdyke, staring at me, surprised, but in a nice way. 'Is everything OK?'

She looked amazing. She was wearing a knitted

silk and cashmere dress with real gold thread at the neck and cuffs, tastefully matched with a Hermes scarf with her own initials on it.

I know about this stuff because Mum works in a drycleaners.

‘Everything’s not OK, is it Emmy?’ said Ms Fosdyke gently.

‘Please don’t go,’ I said. ‘6F needs you. You’re worth more than fifty million pounds to us.’

Ms Fosdyke sighed. Not in an impatient way, in a concerned way.

‘Come in,’ she said. ‘Let’s have a talk.’

I followed Ms Fosdyke into her staffroom.

‘Have a seat,’ she said.

I sat down on a soft white leather sofa, hoping I didn’t have any tap grease on the back of my skirt from Dad’s van.

‘Would you like a juice?’ asked Ms Fosdyke. ‘I’ve got apple, cranberry, mango, watermelon, mandarin, peach, pineapple or lychee.’

‘No thanks,’ I said.

‘Doughnut?’ she said.

Normally I’d have said yes, specially as Ms Fosdyke had her own Krispy Kreme display case, but I was feeling a bit overwhelmed by actually being in a teacher’s own private staffroom.

Except, now I looked around, I saw that Ms Fosdyke’s staffroom wasn’t quite as huge as I’d thought it would be. She didn’t have a jacuzzi or a round bed or a disco floor, not like some teachers.

And her TV wasn't much bigger than ours at home. The paintings on her wall were better, though. She had one that we had, the waterlily one by that French bloke. But hers were done with real paint rather than just printed.

'Emmy,' said Ms Fosdyke, sitting next to me on the lounge. 'It doesn't have to change anything, me leaving. You'll still study hard and go to university, and eventually you'll be a really good teacher, I know you will.'

I mumbled something about how I couldn't do it without her.

'You can,' said Ms Fosdyke. 'I used to be just like you. I used to look at teachers and think, how could I ever do that job, the most important and prestigious and highest-paid and hard-to-get job in the world?'

'Exactly,' I said.

'Get real, my dad used to say,' sighed Ms Fosdyke. 'Be a brain surgeon.'

'Really?' I said.

Ms Fosdyke nodded.

'But I wanted to teach,' she said. 'So I made myself have courage.'

Before I could ask her how, the toilet in her ensuite bathroom flushed and a man came out. He was much older than Ms Fosdyke and wearing a business suit. I wondered if he was an uncle of hers. One who'd encouraged her to be teacher. And to say thank you, she let him use her private bathroom.

‘Emmy,’ said Ms Fosdyke, ‘this is Joe Greely, my agent.’

I knew what an agent was. A sort of business manager. You have to have one when you earn as much as a teacher does.

‘That name rings an unpleasant bell,’ said Mr Greely, frowning at me. ‘Emily. It was you who put this whole West Chirnside idea into Debra’s head, right?’

‘It’s Emmy,’ I said in a small voice.

But he was right, it was me who told Ms Fosdyke about West Chirnside Primary and how they didn’t have enough teachers because they couldn’t afford them, and how my cousin’s year-three class was being taught by the school caretaker.

Now I wished I hadn’t. I should have guessed that a kind and wonderful teacher like Ms Fosdyke wouldn’t be able to control herself when she heard about a school where a whole year-three class was only learning about door-hinge oil and leaf-blowing. And that she’d offer herself to the poor school, even though they couldn’t really afford her.

It was all my fault. If I’d kept quiet, Ms Fosdyke wouldn’t be leaving us.

‘Don’t blame Emmy for this, Joe,’ said Ms Fosdyke. ‘It’s my decision.’

Mr Greely helped himself to a drink that didn’t look like juice from Ms Fosdyke’s cocktail bar, and a doughnut. He kept giving me looks and I could tell he did blame me.

I decided that if I was ever a teacher I'd insist on having a much lower wage than normal so I wouldn't need an agent.

Except I knew I probably wouldn't ever be a teacher, so it didn't matter.

'Fifty million,' said Mr Greely to Ms Fosdyke with a scowl. 'Creyton College would have coughed up a hundred and twenty million for you, even though you're stubborn and pig-headed.'

'We've been through this,' said Ms Fosdyke, sounding almost as annoyed as she did when she lent the year-six science club her very own electron microscope and they dropped it. 'I'm a teacher. I'm not doing this job for the money. I go where children need me.'

I was about to point out to Ms Fosdyke that the children at our school needed her too, but Mr Greely butted in.

'West Chirnside haven't even got the full fifty,' he said.

'I don't care,' said Ms Fosdyke. 'Do you know how many cake stalls and fetes a school fundraising committee has to put on to raise fifty million pounds?'

She paused.

'How much have they got?' she asked.

'Forty-seven million, six hundred and thirty-two thousand, nine hundred and twenty-eight pounds,' said Mr Greely grumpily. 'So that's even less of a fee I get.'

'You do OK,' said Ms Fosdyke. 'Anyway, some

things are more important than a measly two and a half million. Right now I'd rather you were concerned about a little girl who's feeling very sad.'

Ms Fosdyke turned back to me, and for a few moments her shoulders slumped.

Then she gave my arm a gentle squeeze, stood up, and tossed her head so her fantastic haircut flopped perfectly into place.

I know about this stuff because my auntie works in a dog-trimming parlour.

'I'm sorry, Emmy,' said Ms Fosdyke. 'I've loved being at this school, but I've given West Chirside my word.'

She sighed and poured herself a juice.

Suddenly I realised what was happening.

Ms Fosdyke was feeling sad too. And trapped. She'd made West Chirside Primary a promise, but now she was about to leave us, she didn't want to go. And was wishing somebody could get her out of it.

I stood up.

'Thanks for the talk, Ms Fosdyke,' I said. 'I should be off to class now.'

I needed to get there as quickly as possible.

To start planning how to save Ms Fosdyke.

Ms Fosdyke was a bit late getting to class.

The volunteer warm-up parent was starting to look anxious. He'd done all his warm-up things twice, and was just starting us on our times tables for the third time when Ms Fosdyke arrived.

‘Sorry,’ said Ms Fosdyke after the applause and cheering had died down. ‘It’s turning into a bit of a morning.’

I didn’t mind, because the extra time had given me a chance to work out exactly what we were going to do to save Ms Fosdyke.

My plan was to wait until the volunteer warm-up parent left, then get all the biggest kids in the class to lie down against the door and barricade it shut. Then I’d ring the TV news and tell them we were holding Ms Fosdyke hostage, but in a good way. And when they asked what our demands were, I’d tell them we only had one. That West Chirnside Primary School spend their forty-seven and a bit million pounds on a different teacher.

The volunteer warm-up parent said goodbye and left.

Which was a bit sudden. I wasn’t ready. I didn’t have the phone number for the TV news, and I hadn’t explained my plan to the rest of the class.

I waited till Ms Fosdyke started the lesson, which was a group conversation about personal choices in life. Then I got my phone out and googled under the desk and found the TV news number.

I sent a text to all the other kids explaining my plan. Trouble was, they were all enjoying being part of the conversation so much, they didn’t notice.

I decided I’d have to start the plan on my own and explain it as I went along. I knew I wasn’t big

enough to barricade the door without help, but once I was lying there, the others would get the idea and join in.

I stood up.

And saw something weird through the classroom window.

A TV news cameraman was outside in the corridor with some other TV news people. Which was amazing because I hadn't even rung them yet.

Ms Fosdyke saw me standing up. Then she saw the TV news people in the corridor. Mr Greely was with them.

'I'm sorry,' Ms Fosdyke said to us. 'Looks like we're going to have a bit of an interruption. I'm guessing it's my agent's idea. He's probably thinking that if I'm going to a poor underprivileged school, I might as well get some publicity for it.'

She gave Mr Greely a glare, and I could see she wasn't happy.

I wasn't either. Once this was on the news, and the nation was saying what a saint Ms Fosdyke was, she'd have to keep her word to West Chirnside. I wondered if I should fling myself against the door and try to keep the TV news crew out.

Before I could, they came in.

One of them introduced himself as the director and asked me to sit down and told the class not to wave at the camera.

Another one, who you could tell was a reporter because she was reporting, explained to the camera

what an unusual teacher Ms Fosdyke was. Then she interviewed Mr Greely, who agreed that Ms Fosdyke was a very unusual teacher, and said that her generosity was priceless. He also said that after Ms Fosdyke finished her two-year contract with West Chirnside, she'd be available for transfer to another school for a hundred and fifty million pounds.

The director asked Ms Fosdyke if they could film some scenes in the classroom that would show viewers what an unusual teacher she was.

'Sure,' said Ms Fosdyke. 'I'm feeling a bit tired, so I'm going to ask Emmy to take the class for a while.'

I was sitting down, but I almost fell over.

'Me?' I croaked.

Ms Fosdyke smiled and beckoned me out the front.

Everybody was looking at me.

I went and stood in front of the class. The TV news people switched on a couple more lights and out of the corner of my eye I could see the camera staring at me.

The class was staring at me too, stunned.

'What do you want me to do?' I whispered to Ms Fosdyke.

'Up to you,' she said. 'You're the teacher.'

I was on the news that night.

They didn't show all my lesson, because it went for nearly twenty minutes and that wouldn't have

left time for several wars and a new polar bear cub at the zoo.

But they had nearly thirty seconds of it, enough to show how brilliant 6F were at getting over their camera nerves and coming up with some great ideas in the thought experiment I did with them.

We were brainstorming about teachers, and what the world would be like if they were overworked and underpaid and didn't get much respect.

Garth Webster, who was usually one of the shyest in the class, said a really good thing about how teachers wouldn't be able to give the best of themselves if they had to worry about their car repair bills and their blood pressure and their social lives. I reckon Garth might be a TV host one day.

After the segment finished, I glanced at Mum and Dad.

They were both staring at me, mouths open.

'You were amazing,' said Mum.

'Blimey,' said Dad. 'I think we're going to be better off in our old age than we thought.'

I knew that was just his way of letting me know how proud he was.

'Don't choose a mansion yet,' I said. 'If I do get to be a teacher, I'm probably going to be working in a fairly poor school.'

Mum and Dad didn't look like they were too upset by that.

Not as upset as they were by the sudden thought Mum had.

‘We should have recorded that segment,’ Mum wailed.

I didn’t mind we hadn’t, because I knew I’d never forget it.

Specially the last shot of Ms Fosdyke smiling, her kind eyes shining and her expertly-whitened teeth gleaming. I know about that stuff because Dad’s best friend is a tiler.

On the screen you couldn’t see who she was smiling at.

She was smiling at me.

Thanks, Ms Fosdyke.

Whatever they pay you in the future, you’re worth every penny.